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SUBJECT: YUNNAN IMAMS ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, THE HAJJ, AND BUILDING CHINA'S LARGEST MOSQUE

REF: A) 10 CHENGDU 30; B) 10 CHENGDU 32; C) 07 CHENGDU 100

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¶11. (U) Summary: Southwest China's Yunnan Province has one of the PRC's highest concentrations of Muslims, with over 640,000 Muslims in the province and 140,000 in the provincial capital of Kunming. Muslims' religious freedom in Yunnan is increasing, though unannounced visits by Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB) officials remain common, Imams in Kunming and Shadian told us. One Imam, standing in front of provincial officials, opined that now may be the "best time" in history for China's Muslims due to positive government policies. ConGenOffs observed on-going construction of a colossal mosque in Shadian with a capacity of 20,000 -- larger than the town's Muslim population -- that will become China's largest mosque when completed later this year.
End Summary.

¶11. Kunming Imam: Religious Freedom Increasing

¶12. (SBU) People's freedom to practice Islam in Yunnan is increasing, the Imam of the 400-year old Suncheng Mosque in Kunming, Zhang Caiwei, told Consul General on January 18. "More people need religion. You can see from the number of believers who come to the mosque." There are currently over 640,000 Muslims in Yunnan, Imam Zhang said, of which some 140,000 live in Kunming. (Note and Comment: Although the Imam felt that more people were turning up to the mosque on Fridays, he also told us that only 0.5 percent of Muslims in Yunnan had converted to Islam. The rest, he indicated, were Muslims who had passed their faith from one generation to the next. This suggests that Islam is growing in Yunnan at a far lower rate than Christianity (ref A). At the same time, Muslims in Yunnan may be becoming more active in practicing their religion. This would also be consistent with the increasingly strong self-identification with Islam that Tibetan Muslims recently described to us (ref B).
End Note and Comment.)

¶13. (SBU) Mosques in Kunming are managed by two government-affiliated bodies, Zhang said. The first is the Kunming Muslim Association, a government-controlled NGO that is chiefly in charge of religious affairs at the mosques. The second is the Kunming RAB, which is part of the city government, and which is concerned with the mosque's "administrative" matters. Kunming RAB officials also occasionally visit the mosque to check on its activities, Zhang added. Zhang explained that he was the second-ranking Imam at the mosque, and is also the second-ranking of three members of the Mosque's own Management Committee. His mosque's head Imam, and head of this Management Committee, is also a Deputy in the Wuhua (a district of Kunming) District People's Congress.

¶4. (SBU) There are 136 mosques in Kunming, including in the surrounding rural districts under the city's municipal government, Zhang said. Bigger mosques, including Suncheng, generally have their own Islamic school. Zhang estimated that there were as many as 100 such schools in Kunming alone. (Note: For an in-depth discussion of Islamic education in China, see www.asiaquarterly.com/content/view/166/. End Note.)

II. Shadian Imam: Leader of a Proud, Wealthy Islamic Community

¶5. (SBU) Shadian, which is just outside Mengzi, the capital of Yunnan's Honghe Hani and Yi Autonomous Prefecture, has long been a center for Islamic learning in Southwest China, and is home of the first Chinese translation of the Qur'an. While driving into Shadian, we noted gas station and store signs in Arabic and Chinese, many Chinese women with colorful head scarfs, and a large, multi-storied building that was a four-year Islamic college with boarding facilities housing 300 students from Yunnan and other provinces. The influence of Islam in the town appears to be pervasive: over 95 percent of Shadian's population of 15-20,000 are Hui Muslims. Shadian has 10 mosques; most also have Islamic schools. During a lunch hosted by local FAO officials, we were told that: local Muslims did not eat pork; Shadian forbade liquor stores within city limits; and local Communist Party members were allowed to practice Islam openly.

Building China's "Largest" Mosque; Photo Essay of Shadian

¶6. (U) Beaming with pride, Imam Lin told Consul General on January 19 that, upon its scheduled completion in August, Shadian would have China's largest mosque in terms of physical space. The huge structure will be big enough to hold 20,000 people -- more than all Muslims in Shadian combined. Total investment was about RMB 130 million (USD 20 million), 10

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percent provided by the local government, and the rest coming from private donations from within China. Local Muslims are well known for doing business and many are owners of mining fields, "so they are rich enough," one official told us.

¶7. (SBU) Local officials hope the huge Mosque will promote Islamic tourism and trade to Shadian, possibly even attracting visitors from Southeast Asia and the Middle East. While the city only recorded 100 international tourists last year, it believes that most tourists will come from within China, and plans to build an airport to encourage tourism. (Note: Honghe Prefecture bills itself as the mining capital of China, and the area's wealth is obvious. ConGen Chengdu's previous trip to Shadian in 2007 is reported Ref C, and described a board in front of the old mosque listing donations from mining companies. End Note.)

¶8. (SBU) For a photo essay of the nearly completed mosque, and other sites in Shadian with an Islamic flavor see www.intelink.gov/communities/state/chengdu/ar_chives/a_visit_to_yunn.html.

Now "Best Time" in Chinese History for Muslims?

¶9. (SBU) Standing within earshot of local and provincial PRC officials who joined the "unofficial meeting," Lin, who spent 10 years living in Saudi Arabia studying Islam and Arabic, said now is the best time in history for China's Muslims because the Communist Party's religious policies are "so good."

¶10. (SBU) Lin said the leading members of his mosque's management committee were first elected by mosque members before being "recognized" by the Islamic Association and the local RAB. This management committee is headed by Imam Ma Kaixian, who is also Deputy Director of China's Islamic Association and Vice Chairman of the Yunnan Chinese People's Political Consultative

Conference (CPPCC). Asked whether any proposed members had ever been refused by the government, Lin said he was unaware of any such cases.

Rising Incomes Mean More Muslims Trying to Visit Mecca

¶11. (SBU) As incomes in China rise, more and more Muslims are eager to make the Hajj (pilgrimage) to Mecca, Lin said, though they must submit their applications one year in advance and must cover all expense themselves. Each Imam offered a different figure for the number of Chinese Muslims allowed to make the Hajj each year, based on an agreement between the PRC and Saudi Arabian governments, with Imam Zhang in Kunming saying it was one person per 2000 Muslims, and Imam Lin in Shadian offering the figure of one per 1000. 1400 Muslims from Yunnan are generally allowed to go, Zhang said; in 2009, 118 of these were from Kunming. Imam Lin said Shadian gets a special dispensation and is allowed to send 200 people per year -- perhaps a concession granted to Shadian as a predominately Muslim town within an autonomous minority prefecture.

¶12. (SBU) Note and Comment: We understand that Saudi Arabia uses 0.1 percent of a country's Muslims as a guideline on how many can visit Mecca for the Hajj in a given year -- a percentage in line with Imam Lin's figure for Shadian, but which suggests that Kunming Muslims face a quota only half as big as that allowed theoretically by the Saudi Government. This suggests that, for at least some parts of China, the PRC government continues to allow fewer of China's Muslims to travel on the Hajj per year than the actual number who should be allowed per agreement between the Saudi and PRC governments. End Note and Comment.)

III. Background on Muslims in Yunnan: Protection Under Yuan, Persecution Under Qing, and Killings During Cultural Revolution

¶13. (U) Yunnan has one of the highest concentrations of Muslims in China, dating from Yuan Dynasty emperor Kublai Khan's appointment of Sayyid Ajjal Shams al-Din Omar to be provincial governor in 1274. Most of Yunnan's Muslims belong to the Hui ethnic minority, descended from Western and Central Asia Muslims who first migrated to China during the Tang Dynasty.

¶14. (SBU) Lin described misfortunes under the Qing Dynasty, when Han-Hui tensions and perceived mistreatment by government officials led to a series of uprisings and massacres during which 700,000 of Yunnan's 800,000 Muslims were killed. The most significant of the violent episodes, according to historical sources, was the so-called Panthay Rebellion in the mid-1860s

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that led to the brief establishment of an independent sultanate in Dali lasting almost 20 years, as well as to the deaths of perhaps as many as one million Muslims.

¶15. (U) Shadian was also site of the 1975 "Shadian Incident" during the Cultural Revolution, when rising Han-Hui tensions ultimately led to armed clashes and a crackdown by the People's Liberation Army that left 866 of Shadian's Hui Muslims dead.

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